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ABSTRACT

To investigate factors influencing holistic writing evaluations, writing samples from children in grades two and five were evaluated holistically by a team of teachers. Papers were rated from one, for a poorly written paper, to four, for an excellent paper at that grade level. Correlations were run between holistic ratings and both traditional variables--ideas, form, creativity, mechanics, and wording--and two new variables--expressiveness of language and cohesive harmony. Holistic ratings correlated significantly with student reading and language scores on the Metropolitan Achievement Test, the number of words in the student samples, and the number of errors per 100 words. The use of expressive language, measured by the number of unique modifiers, emerged as a significant variable. No significant correlation, however, was found between holistic ratings and cohesion harmony, indicating that chain interactions were not the best measure of overall writing quality. (MM)

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Factors in Holistic Ratings of Children's Writing

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This study investigated the factors that influence holistic ratings of children's writing. Although holistic ratings are reliable, there has been little agreement on the extent to which ratings are influenced by various characteristics of children's writing. That reading and writing are closely aligned cannot be denied (Aulls, 1975; Evanechko, Ollila, & Armstrong, 1974; Evans, 1977). The ability to comprehend more sophisticated structures in reading is reflected in a child's writing.

General appearance of a paper influences grading, especially in the elementary grades (Briggs, 1970; McColly, 1970). Although it has been shown that teachers base their judgments of quality on content and organization (Freedman, 1982), the mechanics of writing wield a

ED240605

CS 208 167

powerful influence on grades (Harris, 1977; Moss, Cole, & Khampalikit, 1982; Simpson, 1973; Stewart & Grobe, 1979).

Diversity of vocabulary had an effect upon holistic ratings in studies by Grobe (1981) and King & Rentel, (1981). In addition, the mode of discourse, whether oral or written, influences several of the above factors and, hence, teachers' perceptions of the work.

Because the factors influencing holistic ratings are diverse, a systematic investigation was made of the relationship between holistic ratings of writing quality and a variety of variables typically recommended as useful predictors of excellence, as well as some new, promising variables. The question was the extent to which raters relied upon the traditional variables, both global and mechanical, in contrast to the newer variables of cohesion analysis and expressive language.

Traditional Variables

Diederich (1961) arrived at five factors that have influenced the grading of English papers during the past 20 years. They are:

1. Ideas
2. Form, including organization and the quality of analysis
3. Flavor, which has been redefined as creativity
4. Mechanics of writing
5. Wording, or the lexicon chosen to express one's ideas.

Legibility of handwriting has been examined by a number of researchers from James (1927) to Briggs (1970). They found that penmanship has an important influence upon the grades assigned by teachers. McColly (1970) found a greater interrater reliability for handwritten papers than for typed papers, indicating that readers

automatically assign a lower grade for poor penmanship and a higher grade for good penmanship.

Studies of writing at different educational levels show that as students develop facility with written English, different aspects of writing emerge as more important in grading. In a study at the elementary school level, Simpson (1973) noted that mechanics of writing have a greater influence upon teacher approval or disapproval than does sentence structure. Grobe (1981), working with students in grades five, eight, and eleven, found the most important factors in grading to be the total number of words written and the number of spelling errors per paper.

By the high school level, content and organization emerge as the most important factors in determining grades, according to a study by Harris (1977). However, mechanical errors and errors in English usage had the capacity to negate these qualities.

Language usage, spelling, capitalization, punctuation, and grammar become less important as students become more proficient in written English. At the college level, mechanics of writing drops to last place in importance, according to Freedman (1979). Teachers rated content as the most important quality, followed by organization, sentence structure, and finally, mechanics.

These traditional variables - penmanship, mechanics, sentence structure, length of text, content, and organization - apparently are the factors to which teachers attend in grading papers, but they do not really indicate the quality of unity, nor do they address the developmental stages of becoming a good writer. It seems that

teachers are more likely to attend to the miniscule aspects of writing but miss the mark on whether kids are cohesive, or are making sense.

New Variables

In addition to the variables traditionally linked with writing quality, two new and promising variables were examined: expressive language, illustrated through the use of descriptive modifiers, and cohesive harmony, identified through chain interactions. The first was selected in response to an intuitive feeling that better writers employ more adjectives and adverbs in their written work, making it more interesting to read and therefore of seemingly higher quality. Cohesive harmony was investigated because current work in this area indicated that it might be a relevant factor in holistic ratings.

Although English textbooks at the elementary level exhort teachers to encourage their students to use modifiers in their writing (Fillmer, Lefcourt, & Thompson, 1980), few studies have examined the effect that the use of expressive language has upon the perceived quality of writing. To clarify this point, this writer attempted to determine the effect that the inclusion of descriptive modifiers had upon holistic ratings.

Some attention has recently been focused on applying the concept of cohesion to children's writing. Readers for the 1980 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) writing strand were instructed to assess cohesion and coherence, new variables in writing assessment. Indications are that they found the four-point scale for judging cohesive quality, developed for this task, a useful instrument in judging the overall quality of writing (Odell, 1981).

Halliday & Hasan (1976) have outlined a system of text analysis through a measure of five types of cohesive devices - reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, and lexical cohesion - and have further extended this system to include cohesive chains and chain interactions (Halliday & Hasan, 1980). A chain is a repeated word or concept occurring in a text or, in cases of collocation, a series of words that regularly co-occur, such as classroom, teacher, desk, chalk. For a chain interaction to occur, two or more members of one chain must appear with two or more members of another chain in the same relationship, offering a doubly analyzed structure. The percentage of words in chains (relevant tokens) that appears in chain interactions (central tokens) yields the cohesive harmony score.

The Study

For this study children in grades two and five in a small suburban school district in New Jersey were asked to respond to the following stimulus:

E.T. went home and you have gone with him. Describe the world you found when you stepped off the spaceship.

The writing was done under the direction of the classroom teachers and papers were identified by number only. Forty-eight percent of the writers were male and fifty-two percent were female. None of the children expressed any difficulty in writing on the topic.

The papers were evaluated holistically by a team of teachers at each grade level and were given a rating from one, for a poorly written paper, to four, for an excellent example of writing at that particular grade level. Examples of second grade papers, as they were written by the children, are reproduced here.

Holistic Rating - 1

When Et came home with me and we played games and we will play all games and then we will play a game came Mrs. Pacman on T.V and then I did my homework and then we whent to play outsid and then we come bake insidde.

Holistic Rating - 4

It was weird. The pepole on the planet all looked like E.T. But there names were different. There was a Q.T. there was a G.T. there was a Me.T. too. On the planet I was called P.T. E.T. took me to a Motel so I got some sleep. The next day E.T. said go back to your home. So I took a spaceship home. I made a lot of wrong turns. At the North Star I made a right turn when I should of made a left turn. But I got home well. I told my friends I met E.T. They said sure Kevin sure.

Analysis

Correlations were run between holistic ratings and both traditional and new variables. Not surprisingly, the correlation between the holistic rating and scores in both reading and language on the Metropolitan Achievement Test were high, .559 and .609 respectively, and were significant at the .0001 level. The older variables of total number of words written and errors per 100 words also showed high correlations (.347 and .448) and were again statistically significant.

Insert Table 1 about here

Table 1
Correlations of Important Variables
with Holistic Ratings

Reading	.5591	Mechanical	.4883	Cohesive	.1237
	.0001	errors	.0001	harmony	.1070
Language	.6077	Total words	.3474	Expressive	.2728
	.0001		.0001	language	.0003

Note: top number indicates correlation; bottom number indicates significance level.

There was a low (.124) and statistically non-significant correlation between holistic rating and cohesion harmony. Based on these results, chain interactions are not the best measure of the overall quality of writing. They seem instead to be merely a measure of redundancy and, indeed, some stories with a high cohesive harmony score were monotonous and lacked creativity. To illustrate, the first story printed above obtained a cohesive harmony of 74 percent while the second story had 44 percent cohesive harmony. Few readers would disagree that the second story bears a quality of writing not found in the first, yet the measure of cohesion does not correspond to the intuitive rating.

Expressive language also emerged as a significant variable. To measure expressive language the ratio of unique modifiers, excluding possessive pronouns and temporal modifiers, was determined. In this analysis it was found that the first story has only two expressive modifiers while story number two has 14. The difference is that four percent of the total words are modifiers for the first story with 13 percent for the second. It appears that good writers use more and a greater variety of adjectives and adverbs to describe details of their presentations than do poor writers.

Summary

This examination of the relationship of a number of variables to holistic ratings shows that mechanical variables are highly valued by teachers. The length of the paper also has an important influence on holistic ratings.

Although cohesive harmony has been promising in research using children's dictated stories, it does not appear as promising in differentiating between writers. A paper that might be rated as incoherent can, through the simple device of repetition, obtain a high cohesive harmony score. This finding is supported by a recent study by Pappas (1981), who found that first grade children produced stories of a higher quality when retelling them than when writing them. Although it might be useful to incorporate this measure of cohesion as one of many variables, it was not a particularly useful one in this study.

A new variable, the number of descriptive modifiers, may have captured a new dimension in holistic ratings. It was an important factor in these stories written by children in the second and fifth grades. Further investigation will determine its importance in influencing holistic ratings under other conditions.

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